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ABSTRACT

Alumni can serve many functions in college admission work. The alumni's greatest asset in admission work is their experience of the alma mater. Having alumni meet with potential students may be the best use of alumni by admission officers. Alumni can meet with prospective students in a variety of contexts. When meeting with students at a function that may involve other alumni, however, alumni must never lose sight of a focus on prospective applicants. Through writing letters, making telephone calls, or visiting schools, alumni can initiate recruiting contacts with prospective students and can familiarize the students with a college they may not have considered. When a college admission counselor is sent to unfamiliar cities to recruit, alumni living in those cities can serve as support personnel for the counselor in his recruiting efforts. Most active alumni networks involve alumni in at least three aspects of admission work: recruitment, interviewing, and yield strategy. Besides logistical support and contact through recruiting and interviewing, alumni can help through organizing and hosting events such as yield parties. Alumni can be an invaluable asset and a strong selling-point of the college to prospective students. Admission officers are encouraged to use their alumni in their admission efforts. (NB)

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# The Time is Now: Alumni Admissions Programs

Session #89

"Alumni and Admissions: Uses or Abuses"

given by

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Alumni and Admissions: uses or abuses

It was four years ago that I assumed a new role as Amherst College's coordinator for the alumni admission network; I had been on the job but a mere two months when I received a call from one of our alumni volunteers. On the line was an enthusiastic and self-assured voice who proceeded to itemize all that he had done for admissions over the years. I wondered how our alumni admission work could ever survive without him until I heard the climatic request that he seriously wanted to sit in for the dean during his vacation and travel times. Even as a newcomer to alumni admissions, something nudged me inside - this didn't seem appropriate. After putting him off, I consulted with my colleagues and learned that I had had my first dose of our greatest alumni pain. Many years later I was still saying no to this overdoer. This experience led me to my first rule of thumb: Alumni do not substitute for the dean of admission! I have concocted many more such rules since.

I also inherited a training manual, newly drafted by one of our alumni volunteers. As I began reading it, I learned much about the drafter's background, because each page proceeded to map out with militaristic precision, the movement of our volunteer troops across the battlefield of secondary schools, armed with marketing artillery and moving with the force of General Patton's field soldiers. I still recall my bemused thoughts as I flipped the last page of the draft - what impression would the overt military analogy make? Was I now leading the secret army or C.I.A.? This generated my second rule of thumb: alumni are not a volunteer army.

By now you may be wondering what I propose to talk about? So was I for some time! I'm supposed to cover the activities of alumni on behalf of admission. My brief review of literature in preparation suggested multi-uses of alumni, more than I could hope to cover in this talk. Thus, I will attempt to outline general activities within certain guiding principles and suggest some precautions as I proceed. The first useful caution you now know - alumni do not substitute for deans nor are they storm troopers designed to soften a market for later dean's work.

If an analogy is helpful, then I suggest ambassadors but not in the official state department definition. I suspect the cultural exchange officer might provide the closest approximation.

The Alumni's greatest asset in admission work is their experience of alma mater. We admission folk need to capitalize on this. How? Have your alumni meet and chat with students. This seems straightforward, but there is great variety in the expectations of what that contact should be. And those expectations vary also depending on whether you are the admission officer, alumni or student. The student dreads the interview, fearing the worst, and believing the interview will be the deciding factor in his admission folder. The alumni most likely want to pass judgment on the chance for admission, while the admission officers dread all outcomes, since they've lost control of a vital contact with a student. Yet, the interview may be the best use of alumni.

What will transpire? Hopefully a pleasant enough chat which will result in some mutual respect between a prospective student and an alumni and in a building block of trust for future contacts. That trust is emblematic of another rule of thumb regarding what alumni can do to help admissions. We admission folk should convey trust to our alumni; trust in their good instincts, their fine education obtained from alma mater, and their good will as shown in their volunteering of time and energy.

Use your alumni then and have them meet students in all kinds of contexts, at schools, at fairs (those now ever growing infamous occasions for getting the word out about your school), at receptions, at concerts, at athletic events, through phone calls, etc. The only limit is that of your own creativity. Alumni groups have organized their own college nights, sponsored bus trips to their alma maters, held luncheons, special discussions, or lectures, inviting prospective students to all such functions as an opportunity to learn more about their colleges or universities.

There can be a case made for an admission year cycle providing all the events for an alumni association in a particular locale. We begin with the fall reception

for interested students when an admission officer also happens to be in town. Then, the December holidays bring current students back to their hometowns for luncheons or discussions with alumni and prospective applicants. The winter months might be a time to bring a faculty member or the chorus out to regale alumni and local interested students. And just as the April thaw hits, it's time for polishing the case for choosing alma mater through a reception for admitted students, euphemistically called the yield party.

Whatever the activity, I would offer a few cautionary guidelines. Never allow your alumni to lose sight of a focus on prospective applicants if the function is one that will also bring other alumni out of the woodwork. The worst kind of event is one which shows your alumni as the old cronies they all have the natural tendency of being. Plan a program or segment of a program which draws some of your alumni group together with prospective students. If the initial focus is there, the rest of the situation chemistry will precipitate the learning about alma mater by the prospective students.

The focus of meeting kids can shift into recruiting and this is useful where your institution may not be known or may not have seen much activity over a number of years. Through letter-writing or phone calls or school visits, alumni can introduce the school name and be the initial recruiting contact. The word of caution here is proper training and training not in presentation skills but more on conveying proper message and right tone about your school. Again, you can assume your graduate has a certain confident articulation ability. What you need to convey to your alumni is how they use those talents to best present the school.

The recruiting focus can also be more supportive rather than direct contact. When you're faced with sending a new counselor to recruit in a large and unknown territory like Los Angeles or Seattle, what better resource for logistics on the trip do you have than local alumni who know schools, locales and the best roads to drive between schools and even how long it takes at differing times of the day. Logistical support of travel is a great alumni resource and, at some schools, can even turn into gracious overnight hospitality and thus some savings on travel bucks.

But there's a price for the latter, namely less relaxing time for yourself or for whomever is traveling!

Most active alumni networks involve alumni in at least three aspects of admission work: recruitment, interviewing, yield strategy. The particulars of their involvement can vary widely as well as techniques. We are all familiar with Book Awards and local alumni chapter scholarships, usually handed out at high school graduations. These are marvelous recruiting devices and I suspect there are many more still to be conceived.

From my survey of schools with alumni admission programs, the most characteristic use of alumni is for admission interviews. Especially at schools which still require interviews, alumni make possible the interviewing of all applicants. Increasingly, alumni interviews are shifting from an evaluation focus to an informational one, always with recruitment as an underlying stratagem.

The interview brings into critical consideration some potential abusive uses of alumni. Don't use alumni in place of regular staff. Alumni are always extensions of the admission office or effort. For any prospective student, they can be an entree to the college, an ambassador if we recall my original analogy. But most students who become serious about your school will want to move beyond the alumni, to visit the campus and probably to meet with an admission officer, just to be sure they have played every trump card for their chances of admission.

Don't involve alumni in admission decisions unless you're ready to include all of your alumni representatives in your committee deliberations. Welcome input from alumni especially encouraging them to report on the more personal characteristics of a candidate, on the dimensions which go beyond paper and objective test results. Invite alumni to share their impressions, not vote on an admission decision.

If recruiting is one of your central uses for alumni, be certain that all alumni know and are comfortable with the sales approach and techniques. There's nothing worse than for an over-zealous and aggressive alumni to transfer his sales pitch used in hawking autos or microwave popcorn to your instituion, especially

if your admission literature, videos and staff all employ a subtle, low-key style. The same is true of techniques. Don't have alumni do cold phone calling to prospects if the admission staff itself never engages in such an activity, unless all your staff stands ready to explain and offer training which promises to offer some consistency in approach and tone.

Recruiting activity can be great fun and very creative. I don't think any school has resorted to alumni doing door-to-door canvassing as is done in political campaigns,but many schools have alumni canvass,by phone,all schools and prospects on the data base within their alumni's local regions. Often, the purpose for a call is to follow-up on a mailed invitation to a reception or actually to extend an invitation. The personal contact by a local alumni can leave a positive impression and make the difference between attending and eventually applying or not.

Besides logistical support and contact through recruiting and interviewing, alumni can help through organizing events. This is the entire area which can be summarized as hospitality. The yield party may be the best example of such hosting functions. Again, there can be wide variation in the degree of involvement depending on whether an event is held in an alumni home or at the local inn. The former requires a large extension of the alumni since a home function entails cleaning and catering. Increasingly, admission offices are turning to alumni as hosts for gatherings because they are accomplished or at least employed and can serve as good role models for inquiring students.

A few examples might help illuminate. My former college had regular April yield parties. Their conception, in fact, came from a local alumni group which thought it would be great to have admitted kids mingle with a variety of graduates. The format has been perfected. A Saturday or Sunday morning brunch is held in an alumni home, with invitations going to all admitted students, even those already committed through early decision and to all alumni admission folk as well as club officers. I've been present to witness the energized chat and the zeroing in of shared interests that comes about especially between recent graduates and those wavering about where to go. I also fondly remember the fellow student chit-chats

evolving between those committed to attend and those wavering on the brink while munching away on muffins, bagels or sandwiches. The yield among admitted students from this area has been consistently above 50% and among the highest for any region in the country. We owed a lot to this alumni group.

It may be useful for me to share also a negative experience. One alumni group which was hosting a major traveling theatre presentation from the college decided to invite area high school students and all prospective applicants. The drama was the central event of the evening, followed by a reception. Reports came back to us that the high school students exchanged few words with any alumni because the alumni congregated by themselves, exchanging war stories and the like. We learned later that a few promising prospects had been so disappointed in the lack of interaction that they lost interest in the college. The problem was the absence of any focus by our alumni at the reception on the prospective students. There are some dangers in this line of work. Rule of Thumb: if you are building up expectations involving prospective students and alumni, be sure to meet them.

In these brief remarks, I hope I've conveyed some of the appropriate functions which alumni can fill as our institutional ambassadors. Don't be afraid to call on them for a variety of contacts with students. Let your creativity have full reign also. But remember that they are volunteers who need coaching, updated information and almost constant reinforcement that they are appreciated and their volunteer commitment of time is valued. One of my colleagues will share some reflections on how to manage such an alumni program and provide all this proper stroking.

For my part, I remind you to use your alumni with trust. They are an invaluable asset and can be a strong selling-point of the college to prospective students. And for a former alumni admission coordinator like myself, many alumni have become personal friends rather than substitute deans or foot soldiers of the college. In my experience the uses of alumni in the admission effort far outweigh possible abuses. Use them and treat them well. Thanks.